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KISHA C. THOMAS  
Intern



POST OFFICE BOX 44003  
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA 70804  
(225) 342-7342

FAX: (225) 342-0364  
email: [caucusb@legis.state.la.us](mailto:caucusb@legis.state.la.us)  
[www.llbc.louisiana.gov](http://www.llbc.louisiana.gov)

## LLBC's Response to President Bush

President Bush must keep his promises.

He must keep his grand gestures and majestic promises for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast area. For years the federal government has known that the main buffer from a hurricane, the protective Mississippi River delta, was quickly eroding away, leaving the historic city of New Orleans perilously close to disaster. Earlier this year the Federal Emergency Management Agency ranked the potential damage to New Orleans as among the three likeliest, most catastrophic disasters facing this country. At this point, the speculation is over. The potential damage is a reality and Katrina has ranked as the most destructive and most expensive natural disasters this country has ever faced.

Of course we don't believe Bush caused the hurricane, but if he does not find a real way to keep the promises he delivered in his recent speech in New Orleans, the destruction that will stem from inaction will be paramount to Katrina's.

In his Thursday night speech, Bush said he has ordered a comprehensive review of the government's response to the aftermath of Katrina. Standing before a camera and microphone in New Orleans' deserted Jackson Square, the president told the nation that there were failures "at every level of government." These failures caused misery, added destruction and death to those that live in the Gulf Coast region. The people of the affected areas realize the delicate balance of nature. They realize that the beauty, wonder and splendor of the areas they live in is delicately and dangerously balanced against nature's whim. That is a choice that many Southerners gladly make, but even though our existence is sometimes a perilous balance, we do not expect our government to be as capricious as nature in determining our fate.

He said four years after 9/11, the people have "every right to a more effective response in a time of emergency." Again, President Bush needs to keep his promises. It has been four years since the 9/11 tragedy, but it has been the second time that Americans were forced to watch their homeland scourged by an uncontrollable wrath. More importantly, it is the second time this nation sat and watched, and waited for an organized and timely federal response. Again, the president must learn to keep his promises.

Bush also acknowledged that poverty and racism surfaced in the hurricane disaster and must be confronted as the Gulf Coast rebuilds. He announced the creation of a "Gulf Opportunity Zone" to include Louisiana, Mississippi and



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Alabama. The plan includes tax relief, incentives for job-creation and loan guarantees for businesses. Bush said entrepreneurs will break the cycle of poverty. How will this grand plan unfold? Will the images of people stranded atop buildings, waiving makeshift signs and pleading for help convert the perception of race overnight. Will these indelible images somehow eliminate the endemic racism that has plagued this area for generations? Since we all stood together, whether on rooftops or in cypress houses, white and black, young and old, mother and child, and stranger and stranger still – will all of that suffering, brief, but no less tragic in our history in this place – will it reconcile the hardened hearts of many to compassion and opportunity, or will this tragedy align itself with others, where the rich feast on a buffet of opportunity, while the poor scrap for dismal leftovers? Mr. President this is a spectacular challenge, but again – how will you keep your promises?

The dilemma of race and class are intertwined like vines on a trellis. The Gulf Coast region, while grand in natural splendor is a deep and widely known for its vile history of epic racism. Over time the stark images of slavery, sharecropping, and the civil rights movement, have been replaced with more palatable and institutional racism. Gone are the daily images that most of America has associated with racism, but they have been replaced with a more insidious form. Not one so much of images, but rather racism as a lifestyle. No longer do signs dot the landscape that say, "White's Only", but a lifestyle that heeds the same message. Poor blacks have been relegated not out of restaurants by signs, but out of the American dream through social segregation. It is this form of institutionalized racism that America watched from their living rooms. They watched the poor, those with no transportation and no way out of the city – wait. Wait, like they always have, for an elusive dream that someone will come and help them. Even during the early stages of the evacuation when buses where shuttled out of state to the Astrodome, the prevailing thinking by the president's own mother in response to the outpouring of support by the Houston area was, "so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this is working very well for them," Mrs. Bush told American Public Media's "Marketplace" program, before returning to her multi-million dollar Houston home. If this is the thinking of the educated, wealthy, power-wielding class – then what exactly is the average individual supposed to think?

Furthermore, rebuilding New Orleans and the devastated Gulf Coast region will take all of us. It will take a dedicated workforce, and will be a labor of love. The people of the devastated region are willing to do the work. They are willing to



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complete the task and rebuild not only New Orleans, but all of the affected areas. However, how will this area rebuild using your plan for inclusion and minority opportunity when the federal government temporarily suspended the use of the prevailing wage rate, nixed bid requirements, and contracted with those that forgo the local and regional labor force in favor of out-of-state contractors? We can do the work, but we need real opportunity not empty promises shrouded in rhetoric.

Mr. President, the problems that New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were forced to confront head on in the wake of the storm were there all along. The storm simply brought them to light for all of America to see. This region wants to rebuild, and will, but we need you to keep your promises. Our tenacity as a city and as a region is not in question. We will rebuild and return to the region laid to waste by nature's wrath, but we do not want to enter our homeland as spectators, but as the architects of our future. To do this Mr. President all of us in the Gulf Coast region call on you to keep your promises as we forge ahead to build better futures for all of us.